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ABSTRACT

This study discusses the successes and failures that resulted when fifth grade students used email to compose response journals. Every student was required to send at least one email a week to the teacher describing and reacting to the novel they were reading independently. The teacher would respond each evening. The study was conducted in an affluent suburban elementary school located just outside of a major northeastern city in Pennsylvania where there was a great deal of access to computers and the Internet. Twenty-eight students participated in this project for four months. The students used the email program available via HUBSCentral. Upon analyzing the data that were collected during this study, the following topics became apparent. There was a wide variety in the length of the emails and they were used to communicate many different messages. Other issues that emerged were: motivation to participate in the activity, success with word processing, opportunity for typing practice, and opportunities for dynamic conversation. Many challenges were observed as well. These include: word processing frustrations, technical difficulties, and spelling challenges. Finally, on the teacher's part, the activity proved to be convenient yet time consuming. Contains 14 references. Appendixes contain a response journal questionnaire and a letter to parents. (Author/RS)

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Reading Response Journals via Email

Master's Thesis

Colleen Kaiser

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master's Degree in Applied Technology
Chestnut Hill College
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CS 511 955

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Abstract

This study discusses the successes and failures that resulted when fifth grade students used email to compose response journals. Every student was required to send at least one email a week to the teacher describing and reacting to the novel they were reading independently. The teacher would respond each evening. The study was conducted in an affluent suburban elementary school where there was a great deal of access to computers and the Internet. Twenty-eight students participated in this project for 4 months. The students used the email program available via HUBSCentral.

Upon analyzing the data that were collected during this study, the following topics became apparent. There was a wide variety in the length of the emails and they were used to communicate many different messages. Other issues that emerged were: motivation to participate in the activity, success with word processing, opportunity for typing practice, and opportunities for dynamic conversation. Many challenges were observed as well. These include: word processing frustrations, technical difficulties, and spelling challenges. Finally, on the teacher's part, the activity proved to be convenient yet time consuming.

Problem Statement

In this day and age, the use of computers as a means of communication is very common. As Americans, we have become connoisseurs of electronic mail used for both business and personal purposes. With this in mind, I have already sought to make parent-teacher and student-teacher communication easier by distributing my email address to families over the past three years. With this method, I noted that simple questions could be answered instantly using this type of contact. I also felt at ease in writing my

responses because I had the opportunity to think about my answers before responding. I could reply in the privacy of my own home, too. Finally, I had hard copy evidence of any dialogue that was exchanged.

Regardless of these benefits, my children are still using paper and pencil most often to compose written communication in school. One example is the dialogue journals my students and I were using last year to discuss the novels they were reading individually. In these journals, students wrote letters once a week to me, the teacher. Their entries addressed issues in the books they were currently reading. The students handed them in and I wrote back to them in a letter format, addressing their issues and questions. I was sure to return my responses to them the next day so that the feedback was as immediate as possible. The purpose of these journals is to stimulate authentic discussion about literature between teachers and students. In addition, the teacher is in constant contact with the children regarding the book choices they are making each week. Students also utilize writing skills and the teacher, in turn, models standard English grammar and conventions in her replies.

Because I have already had success with email and since I know that research points to the many benefits of word processing over paper and pencil, I decided to investigate how an email-mediated dialogue journal would work. Based on research to which I have been exposed and discussions that I have had in graduate classes, I believed there would be great advantages to electronic mail dialogue journals.

First, I thought that, since the students would be involved with computers, there might be a greater sense of enthusiasm on the part of the students who use email journals rather than pencil and paper journals. Additionally, students who prepare email

responses are essentially practicing word processing skills that will be of great help to them in the future. Because the students and I would be the only two handling the dialogue journal letters and responses, I recognized that the students might feel a greater sense of privacy and might be more willing to express true feelings about literature.

In addition, with email, the students may have been propelled to write lengthier responses because mistakes are easier to correct and there would be less physical strain on their hands. I thought that it might also be true that the students would decide to create new entries more often to send to the teacher because they were more willing to type than write, allowing ongoing conversations about the novels they were reading to be maintained. For students who have a difficult time using cursive writing, I thought the word processing option might be a welcomed opportunity since students might have felt much better about the presentation of their messages. Using email, there would also be a less time for students to wait for a response from the teacher. Using email also provides additional advantages for the teacher who usually needs to lug notebooks home in order to respond to them. The ability to simply access the student responses via email saves the teacher both time and labor.

Despite the possible advantages, there were also several concerns that arose with using email-mediated dialogue journals.

A major consideration that arose was when and where email could be accessed. Students would have to be on a regimented schedule, having access to email once a week. In a class of 28 students, each child was limited to 20 minutes a week to create his or her response. Simultaneously, it might be necessary to take time away from other subjects in order for students to *access* the replies to the original messages since there were 28

students and only four classroom computers. An additional concern was related to the quality of grammar and conventions that students use when utilizing electronic mail. When using email many people disregard appropriate grammar and conventions and often use abbreviations, slang, leave out marks of punctuation, and ignore rules of capitalization. Another consideration was that students who have not yet mastered word processing skills may actually be intimidated by having to email their responses to the teacher.

An additional consideration was the fact that some students may not feel at ease composing responses directly on the computer screen. Those students may actually need to write their initial thoughts in paper and pencil and then type their entries onto the computer screen. This may actually take more time for students to prepare their responses and may discourage them from trying since they know that they have to write every entry twice, rather than just once.

Although students gained practice with word processing skills, they had fewer opportunities to practice cursive writing. Since emailed responses are typed, the teacher did not have the ability to model and correct proper formation of letters in cursive.

The teacher had the formidable task of creating individual email accounts for the students so that they could easily access email. It is possible that many students may not have access from home computers or it may not be a private avenue of communication for all of the children.

Some parents may have expressed concern about their children using email. In the past, some parents have chosen not to allow their students to email me because they feel that it is not a secure method of communication for children. Therefore, it was

imperative to gain parental permission for students to use email-mediated response journals. If many parents refused to grant permission, we could not have email-mediated journals.

All in all, it seemed that using email-mediated dialogue journals with students might have held many advantages for both teachers and students. There were, however, major considerations and provisions that had to be made before beginning. Both users needed be aware of possible drawbacks that may occur. Data collected from students and teachers using email-mediated dialogue journals identified the issues involved in using this form of communication for other teachers considering using this type of activity in their own classrooms. The information will help teachers to understand how email changed and shaped the use of dialogue journals in a fifth grade class.

Review of the Literature

This study investigated the use of dialogue journals by fifth grade students in an electronic mail format.

Dialogue Journals for Responses to Reading

Dialogue journals are a medium of written communication between two individuals through letters in first draft form (Johnston, 1997; Wang, 1996). In a classroom environment, this exchange of ideas usually takes place between a student and a teacher. At other times, it may involve discussion between two students. The teacher, or another student, responds to the prepared letter and a private, written conversation ensues.

The goal of a dialogue *response* journal is to elicit active, ongoing thoughts about a piece of literature that a student is currently reading.

In this situation, intrinsic motivation often increases because children share with teachers in the inquiry process. Teachers and students actually engage in purposeful discussions about literature. This is much different from simply testing or quizzing students on what they have read. The journals reinforce the idea that good readers are able to hold conversations in which they express their thoughts about what they have read. When used in this manner, dialogue journals are essentially a valuable tool for integrating reading and writing.

Dialogue journals provide teachers with the chance to interact with their students in alternative ways. A closer, more personal relationship is able to evolve between the students and teacher (Thomas & Oldfather, 1985; Wolter, 1986). Teachers learn the needs and concerns of students as well as the books they love and the genres they enjoy.

Dialogue journals give students and teachers a chance to engage in personalized discussions. Additionally, these journals reveal much about the reading behaviors that a student is utilizing (Roser & Martinez, 1985).

These journals are generally exchanged through paper and pencil entries. Students write their entries in bound notebooks and, upon completion, give them to the teacher. The teacher then writes a response to the entry and returns it to the student. This procedure brings with it one disadvantage. It takes time to read and respond to the written work. For this reason, students may not recognize the process as true conversation it was intended to be (Roser & Martinez, 1985).

Positive Findings about Dialogue Journals

Throughout the literature, researchers have reported positive results when teachers and students use dialogue journals. There was evidence that dialogue journals have been

successfully utilized in various educational settings- elementary, middle school, and college levels (Atwell, 1998; Cowie, 1997; Fountas & Pinnel, 2001; Garside, 1996; Johnston, 1997; Luft, 1997; McGrath, 1992; Peyton, 1993; Roser & Martinez, 1995; Stanton, 1997; Thomas & Oldfather, 1995; Wang, 1996; Wolter, 1996).

Findings reported indicate that students are self-motivated because they are able to choose the topics about which they write. Students feel empowered by the experience because they are actually conversing with their teachers (McGrath, 1992).

Students also reflect upon literature more deeply due to teacher responses and "think time". The responses offer different viewpoints on issues and are inspired to more critically review their ideas about a topic (McGrath, 1992).

On another level, shy students engage in conversations. Whether realizing it or not, by writing back and forth in letterform, these usually quiet students are sharing ideas and carrying on discussions. These students would most likely not participate in the same discussion held orally in the classroom (McGrath, 1992).

Finally, teachers learn a lot about their students as readers and are able to discuss issues with their students in an informal fashion. Teachers learn about the books students enjoy as well as their insights on the author's craft and other literary elements (Roser & Martinez, 1995). The informal conversations that take place through dialogue journals foster a more personal relationship between the teacher and the students (Thomas & Oldfather, 1985; Wolter, 1996). The teacher is able to joke, gossip, and challenge students while still offering necessary information that the reader needs (Atwell, 1998).

With this in mind, it seemed logical to seek out a quicker, more instantaneous approach, so that *all* students could benefit from the numerous advantages of dialogue

journals. Email is a vehicle of communication in which messages are transferred from person to person almost instantaneously. Like dialogue journals, email gives the students time to think and then communicate. Sending these journals by email could be an obvious alternative to writing them by hand through pencil and paper journals. The process might be less laborious than writing out journal entries and responses by hand. In addition, teachers could respond to student entries more quickly. In this way, students might recognize the exchange as more of a conversation about literature because the teacher's responses could be sent almost instantaneously after they are written. There have been some instances of utilizing these journals through an alternative, technological measure, email.

Email Use in College Settings

To date, research that concentrates on email use frequently deals with college and university settings. In these environments, email is currently used by both teachers and students in a variety of ways. These include: making announcements, posting assignments, asking questions, counseling, sharing news issues, posting grades, and supplying homework hints (Garside, 1996; Poling, 1994).

Although these findings are credible and appropriate for college students, it is reasonable to question whether these same findings will apply to elementary school students. After all, elementary students come in contact with their teachers every day. Students in college meet with their professors less often.

Research Design

Sample

This research study took place in an affluent suburban elementary school that is located just outside of a major northeastern city in Pennsylvania. In the featured classroom there were four computers with Internet access for both students and the teacher to use. (These computers were provided by the school's Parent-Teacher Organization.) The school also has a computer lab that contains approximately 30 computers. The library has an area with 30 additional computers. Both the computer lab and library computers are networked and have Internet access. They are available to all of the students and teachers in the school. Students engage in some type of guided computer instruction twice a week.

The research study took place over a twelve-week period beginning in September of 2002. There were 28 students involved in the research, all of whom were beginning their fifth grade year. The emails produced by the class were analyzed in depth at the end of the twelve-week period. Specific examples of entries were selected because the work that they produced seemed to be representative of the range of work in the larger class. In addition, students were interviewed through the use of a questionnaire. (See Appendix A for the student questionnaire.) Based on their responses, several students were individually interviewed to clarify or expand on their answers.

Procedure

To initiate this study, the entire group of students was first introduced to email-mediated dialogue journals. They were told that they would use these journals to correspond with the teacher on a weekly basis about a novel they are reading.

The teacher spent three days discussing the format and content of the email-mediated dialogue journals. Each entry was required to be at least two paragraphs in

length and in the form of a letter. The students were instructed to give a summary of the selection they had read. They were also encouraged to discuss the characters, the plot, or make connections to their everyday lives. A list of questions was provided to students to help them with their responses. In addition, the teacher showed examples of journal entries on the overhead. The examples served as models of what was expected in the students' emails. After this three-day time period, students were instructed to work independently on formulating journal entries. Each child was assigned a specific day of the week on which his or her journal entry was to be submitted via email to the teacher.

During the first 50-minute computer lab period, students in this study were directly instructed on the use of email. (This is to ensure that all students are familiar with the process of utilizing email.) Each student created an account on HUBS Central that was used to contact the teacher. The students were given the teacher's email address during the lab period. Parents were also informed of the teacher's email address via a letter distributed at the beginning of the school year (See Appendix B for the letter to the parents).

Each day (Monday through Thursday) seven students were assigned a block of time to use one of the four classroom computers. The remaining students went to the library lab. This opportunity was given for 20 minutes once a week during Sustained Silent Reading. (SSR is a 20-minute block of free reading that is built into the daily schedule.) In this time frame, students were expected to compose an email journal message about the independent novel they were reading addressed to the teacher. Each evening, the teacher responded to all of the emails that she received that day.

After the students submitted their journal messages to the teacher, they had the opportunity to access their email from home in the evening. Some students accessed responses during class when they were given computer access in the classroom or library. Otherwise, students did not see the response from the teacher until the following week.

Throughout the length of the study the teacher-researcher looked for journal patterns in communication and chose journal entries that were either representative of or different from that pattern. These journal entries were particularly long, short, or may have contained another unique characteristic. At the end of the study, the students were interviewed as a whole group about their general impression of email-mediated dialogue journals. In the interviews, students were asked to speculate about the length of their emails in comparison to handwritten journal entries. The students were questioned on whether or not they felt other students would benefit from this type of activity.

Data Collected

Throughout this study there were various types of data collected. These included: hardcopies of email dialogue journals and responses, notes taken during the group interview, and responses given by students during individual interviews.

Method of Analysis

The student responses to interview questions were sorted into various categories according to how similar they were. Students were asked to indicate how they enjoyed the activity, the level of difficulty or ease that the email journals required, and whether or not they felt as though others would benefit from this activity. The characteristics of email journal entries were analyzed in a similar way. The categories included: length of

entry, amount of responses that were made on a weekly basis, and content included in each entry.

Analysis of this data provided insights into the ways this group of fifth grade students responded to using email-mediated journals. It identified the benefits and drawbacks of email-mediated journals in this particular setting. The data described the differences that occur when using email-mediated journals rather than handwritten journals.

Findings

How Emailing Happened

On a typical day, seven children composed email-journals. This was according to a schedule that students followed Monday through Thursday each week. Emailing occurred during a twenty-minute SSR period that took place in the afternoon during our Language Arts block. On each scheduled day, four students accessed our classroom computers. The other three would venture out to the lab in the library. While those students were working on their journals, the other students were reading independently. This was usually the only time the students had to access email from school. However, to receive their responses in a timely fashion or to respond to an email, students had the opportunity to access their email from home or at some other free time during the day.

Codes

I collected data through a variety of methods. I printed out copies of all student emails, administered a questionnaire to the class, and had one-on-one discussions with some children. I came up with a variety of codes as I reviewed the data. First, I characterized the emails in two ways. One was the length of each response. The other

was content of each response. In addition, I analyzed responses that students gave in the questionnaire I provided them at the end of my study. After examining them, I concluded that the responses could be broken into six distinct categories: enjoyment/motivation, ease of emailing contrasted with pencil-and-paper, opportunity for typing practice, different opportunities for communication, difficulties with word processing, and spelling challenges. Upon reviewing my own personal comments, I was reminded that there were occasional technical difficulties. Also, I noted that the process was time consuming.

Variety of Length

Although students were given the same instruction and same amount of time to compose a message each week (about 20 minutes), responses clearly varied in length. I categorized them as long, medium, and short. 14 of the email responses were categorized as long, 56 were considered to be medium length, and 81 were classified as short.

An example of a long email:

From: Emilyg (Emily)
Subject my response journal #2 by Emily
Cc:
Send Date: Tue Oct 08, 2002, 02:45:10 PM
Mail Body: The book I have started to read is called "It's not easy being bad" by Cynthia Voigt.
It's the the third and last book in the bad girls series so far.
teh book's about two girls, Mikey and Margalo, who are in 7th grade entering junior high. They've been best friends since 5th grade and have always been partners in gettting in trouble.
Now they aren't very popular because they're always getting back at people or doing something to annoy the teachers.
Mikey and Margalo really want to be popular, or atleast more popular than the other one.
So Mikey decides to throw a Halloween party so she'll be a little more popular. Unfortunatly, it backfires a little.
Mikey is getting jealous of Maragalo because she's getting more popular than her. Margalo's just happy because she's

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actually bettter than Mikey at something. Margalo isn't athletic or as smart as Mikey.
The thing about Mikey and Margalo is that they're both tomboys and they don't do many girl things. the things they do together are plotting revenge, getting out of assingments, and just doing other things that are bound to get them in trouble.
So far I've only read two chapters so i don't know too much about it.

Your student,
Emily

An example of a medium email:

From: Jaimem (Jaime)
Subject responce journal
Cc:
Send Date: Wed Oct 02, 2002, 03:33:48 PM
Mail Body: Dear Mrs. Kaiser,
I just started reading the book Bunnicula. It's about a family that goes to the movies and the find a box with a bunny in it. They go home and they get a cage they give him milk and lettice but he doesn't touch it so they decide to do something else so they give him a name they com up with Fluffy and Dracula, because they found him at a dracula movie, but the mom comes up with bunnicula, and they all liked it, so they all went to bed. In the morning when everyone wakes up all the vegtables are white. No one knows why the veggies are white.

I like this book because it is fun to read and I want to know why the veggies are white. I think the veggies are white because the veggies are diyed white and it takes over night to make them turn white.

your student,

Jaime

An example of a short email:

From: Timothy (Timothy)
Subject response

Cc:

Send Date: Mon Sep 30, 2002, 02:52:51 PM

Mail Body: Dear Mrs. Kiasar,
I'm reading "What Eistein told his Barber". It's a great book. It's about everyday things that we might wonder about.It's split into many different "chapters". In my so far favorite section, they told me it's not burlnui's principal that makes an airplane fly. This book is great. It's the esental book for young phisisists.You should read it!

Sincerely,
Timothy

This evidence clearly shows that typical journal entries ranged from a few sentences to a few paragraphs in length. In comparison, paper and pencil journals that students produced last year also varied in length.

Use of Email Journals

Despite the fact that students were instructed to use the email response journals to communicate a summary and reaction to the book they were reading on a given week, I discovered that students used the journals for other purposes. Some of these included: expressing likes or dislikes about the literature, making predictions for what would happen next, reflecting on a character, making connections, recommending the book to the teacher and other students, posing questions, responding to questions, and communicating personal messages.

Expressing likes or dislikes about the book

Frequently when composing their response journals, students commented on the characteristics they liked or disliked about the book they were reading. This usually came at the end of the entry, after the students had summarized their reading for the week. For example, after reading *Sister vs. Sister*, Jennifer wrote, "If theres a series I want to get it. I

think this is a good book for me because its intresting." Karen expressed, "*Where the Sidewalk Ends* is a good book becase I love poems and I thought it was funny. I like this book alot. I think other people will to!" In early October, Anna articulated her likes and dislikes concerning *Where the Red Fern Grows*. She explained, "It's really a good book. I disliked the part when Billys two dogs die at the end. my favortite part was when little Ann the girl dog swam in the lake to catch the racoon." These typical responses all demonstrate that children often expressed their likes and dislikes of the literature they were reading. This was similar to what students produced using paper-and-pencil journals.

Making predictions

I noticed that students often concluded their journal entries with a prediction about what would happen next in their novels. This is a sound practice of good readers. During a reading of *Crackerjack Halfback* by Matt Christopher, Jared stated, "I predict that Freddie will overcome his fear by tackling someone to win the championship. That is usually what happens in Matt Christopher books." In his October entry, David commented on *Mariel of Redwall*, one of the selections from his favorite series, *Redwall*. "I predict that the travelers are going to meet up with lord Rawnblade who's live long enemy is also Gabool. I hope the young travelers succeed in thier quest." During a reading of *Stone Fox*, Michael asserted his predictions, "I perticed that Little Willy's grandfather will get better and won't die. I also think that Little Willy will get enghouh money to pay the bills." Clearly, these quotations exhibit that predicting was a common practice for many of the students, indicating that they were following the story and thinking about it. Students also did this with paper-and-pencil journals.

Reflecting on characters

Jim's entry, written in early October, summarized his reading of *Return to Del*. This journal entry demonstrates how some students identified with characters in their books. He wrote, "If I could be eney character in this book I would be Steven, a shop manager, because I could get free stuff and When Steven gets angry he becomes a super stong monter named Nevents." Angela expressed her admiration for the character Laura in her book selection, *Nobodies and Somebodies* by Doris Orgel. She wrote, "The one thing i like i like about laura is she asks things like shes not imbaressd Guttless i should say." After reading *Blubber* by Judy Blume, Jennifer empathized with the main character, Julie. "i think that the girls should be nicer to the girl that is being pick on don't you? they soulden't be mean to people like that." Vickie expressed her feelings about Mr. Gorf and some of Mrs. Gorf's students after reading *Sideway Stories from Wayside School*. "I felt sad for the children cause they lost their voices and I was angry with Mr. Gorf Because he took all their voices away." These journal excerpts reveal the way students often related to the characters in their books. Similarly, students related to characters when they used paper-and-pencil journals.

Making connections

While attempting to reflect on the literature they were reading, several students were able to make connections between the books they were reading and themselves or other books. Anna made a connection between herself and Billy, a character from *Where the Red Fern Grows*. "I am the same as Billy because he never gave up and he saved up for two years to get those dogs and i saved up for 1 year to get my dog." In another email, Anna described the common ties between *Little Women*, the book she was

currently reading and *Open Arms*. "This book remindes me of another book i have read. This book was called Open Arms. I think it remindes me of that book because in little women they had to use alot of team work in some parts and they had to use alot of team work in open arms the book." David made a connection between various characters of the *Redwall* series. "The perilious young hare Tammo (the one who's dream is to join the Long Patrol) reminds me of other characters in various other Redwall books who are young, fearless, and turn into great warriors and leaders even though they are so young. Kind of like Sammson, Song, Dann, and many other characters in books of Redwall I've read before this one." These email exchanges exemplify the way students made connections to the literature as they were reading. This reading practice was also evident last year when I used paper-and-pencil journals.

Recommending the book to the teacher and other students

On several occasions, students recommended the books they were reading to classmates and to me. After reading *Spy Kids*, Donna asserted, "My book was 200 pages long i love it so much.I think you shoud you should read it." In response to his reading of *Halloween Tree*, Brian stated, "It is a great book so far and I would recamend the book to people who like adventouruos and interesting books." These statements reveal how students suggested their novels to others. When using paper-and-pencil response journals, students also made book recommendations.

Posing questions to the teacher

As the students engaged in dialogue about their book, they asked questions to which they wanted me to respond. After summarizing Cukko Clock of Doom from the Goosebumps series, Jeffrey asked, "Have you ever read a goosbumps and if you have

than wich one did you read?" Brian asked, "Have you ever read this book or read a book from Avi? He is a great auther." In November, Anthony ended his journal entry with a question to me regarding the actual events of Pearl Harbor. "I was thinking even know if we knew they were attaking would we of perveted Pearl Habor. What do you think Mrs. Kaiser? Also I was thinking how long did it take for them to clear out of Pearl Habor." These questions express the way students were thinking about their reading. When using paper-and-pencil journals, students also posed questions but not as often.

Responding to questions

Students often initiated their journal entries by answering a question that was posed in the previous email message. This action also demonstrates the conversational nature of email. The following is a dialogue that took place between Vickie and me. I began:

Dear Vickie,
Have you read any books in this series before? One of my students from last year loved it!! I really like the idea of pets living in a hotel together while their owners are away. I think that their adventures are very amusing.
What do you think will happen with the secret of the Howliday Inn? Keep me posted!

Your teacher,
Mrs. Kaiser
10-09-02

Vickie replied:

Dear Mrs. Kaiser,
There really wasn't a secret the old dog HAmelton was just trying it so he could find his owner. He finally did and now he is really happy.

On another occasion, Bethany and I had an ongoing dialogue regarding the setting of her story. It began:

Dear Bethany,

It sounds like you are already enjoying this selection. Are you a big fan of science-fiction books?

The beginning of this novel sounds interesting. Do you think Charles Wallace can really read minds? When and where does this story take place? I wouldn't be surprised if it was happening in a different dimension.

I look forward to hearing about next week's adventures.

Your teacher,

Mrs. Kaiser

10-01-02

Bethany responded:

Ok. I don't know where it is I don't think it said where she lived.. it sounds like the author tried to make so that it would go with any time period

The Conclusion of this Week's Presentation

*Bethany

I replied again:
Hi, Bethany! I think after you read the story for a while, you will come to realize in what time period this story is taking place. There are lots of clues in the text. Good luck figuring it out!

Mrs. Kaiser
10-01-02

Bethany responded again:
FINE FINE FINE

The Last Report of the week for The Adventures of Bethany and her Book

On her next weekly response, Bethany began her entry with the comment:

Dear Mrs. Kaiser,

I still can't figure out wut time period it is.

I responded:

Dear Bethany,

A lot has happened since you last told me about a Wrinkle in Time. Why do you think Meg and Calvin both feel like their families don't love them? Is that why they hang around together?

How do you think Mrs. Whatsit and Mrs. Who appeared from thin air? I hope that you can explain more about it next time.

Your teacher,
Mrs. Kaiser
10-16-02

P. S. Keep looking for clues about the time period:

She replied:

I still don;t know!

The exchanges of dialogue (above) make obvious how students vied to respond to questions that I posed to them in prior emails. I noticed that the effort to answer my questions occurred less often in paper-and-pencil journals. In fact, I observed that, with email, many students took time to send an email with the sole purpose of responding to a question I had posed. This option was not available with paper-and-pencil journals.

Communicating personal messages

On several occasions, children chose to send email messages that had nothing to do with the books they were reading but were of a personal nature. During choice time on a Friday afternoon, Anthony chose to compose an email message on the computer. In this instance, he alerted me to the fact that he would be going on a vacation to Europe.

Dear Mrs. Kaiser
I just wanted to let yoy know that im going to London on the16 only for 4 days. And my mom is making nme write a repor on the Tower of London. It's kind of a fild trip but were going to this amuset park indoors It hbas the tallest drp in the world i think. Its like 125 feet drop. itsm about 150 feet tall and thers orther rides. I was just letting you know incase we have any big things ahead. I can't till College Sellemt

FROM
ANTHONY

Jennifer chose to email me on a Saturday in early October to let me know she was bored.

hi mrs keiser how are you doing I'm very board right know are u ? theres nothing to do so I'm typing an email to you
so fair i'v typed to Emily And Jaime thats all i want to type right now so
BYE ~~~~Jennifer~~~~

While on vacation in California, Bethany sent a message to inform me of the accommodations.

the house is really cool! Bethany

At the end of his entry on October 16, 2002, Tommy added a personal message to the end of his weekly book summary. "I think I'm taking a good brake off long books and reading easier stuff for awile. Having a great time in 5th grade so much fun waiting for the grades. I hope they're good." These examples clearly express how students sometimes communicated personal messages to me during this project. This is evidence, too, of their perception that this medium is informal and conversational. These types of responses were rare last year when I used paper-and pencil-journals.

Motivation

Students were generally eager to write their response journals with email. In fact, one parent commented that her son complained about doing response journals last year but didn't complain this year. She speculated that it was due to the fact that the students were completing them via email. When I offered email as an option during Friday "choice time", several students would often run to the computer to log on. This finding is

supported by studies that concluded that the use of email is considered fun (Garside, 1996; Poling, 1994).

In the format of a survey, students were asked to explain if they did anything differently when they composed response journals via email rather than with paper and pencil. Maggie responded, "No but it's funner and easyer on the computer." They were also asked if they would use email-mediated journals with their classes if they were teachers. "Yes, because it's really fun because I love to type and tell people about the books I'm reading," expressed Emily. Vickie said, "Yes, because it's fun typing it on the computer." Additionally, students were invited to report if they thought other students would benefit from using email-mediated journals. To this question, Anna explained, "We could have fun typing on the computer and the teachers would understand the books kids are reading." Angela mentioned, "You should do it on the computer because typing is easier and while we use it for school we can use it with our friends." Noticeably, these quotes demonstrate excitement and a sense of motivation for this activity.

Success with Word Processing

Many students thought this process was "easier" than composing responses with paper and pencil. This finding coincides with a study done by Luft (1997) who concluded that her students found email to be "easy" and preferred email-mediated dialogue journals to those done with pencil and paper.

Upon discussing these comments with students, I found that the word "easy" took on more than one meaning. For example, several students communicated that they were able to type a message faster than to write it by hand. Emily commented, "Pencil and

paper takes too long, and this is fun since I love computers." Jared explained, "For some kids, typing is easier than writing. Typing is faster than writing for me." Anthony said, "It was easier on the computer. I wrote more on the computer." When asked to explain "easier," Anthony stated, "It is easier to type than write. I like to type."

Other students focused on the ease of letter formation on the computer. Karen prefers typing because "it is easier." Her "hands would get tired when writing letters." This doesn't happen with email journals. Jim remarked, "Buts it's easy on computer. And because it takes longer with pencil and paper." When asked to explain this comment he reported, "I don't have to think as much about letter formation, just touch a button, key." Finally, Tommy declared, "You can read what they wrote." It is evident from these responses that students found this process "easy" in several ways.

Opportunity for Typing Practice

Some students were happy to write their journals via email because they felt as though they would see improvement in their typing skills. When surveyed about whether or not in the future, other students would benefit from using email-mediated dialogue journals, Sean responded, "Yes, because it will make there typing better." Maggie commented, "I would be a better typer and get used to it." Bethany asserted, "It is easier to type; it gives you typing practice." These quotes express how students considered the improvement of their typing skills to be a valuable part of this activity.

More opportunities for dynamic communication

It was clear when I analyzed the emails that some students viewed the dialogue that was taking place as true conversation. There were several students who contacted me more often than required. Out of the 12 students who sent emails more than once a

week, 8 of those were girls. Often times this occurred at home during the evening. Sometimes this happened during free time. This allowed for an ongoing conversation to transpire.

In this format, students had the opportunity to initiate conversation. This allowed students to feel empowered (Luft, 1997). Through email students can hold discussions with their instructors without coordinating times. In this way, fluency is promoted (Wang, 1996).

Bethany often emailed me from home, even though that was not required. I spoke with her about why she chose to do this. She explained, "It's fun; you can do it when you want." This comment demonstrates why email communication has an advantage over paper and pencil communication. In this case, Bethany felt excited about trying to communicate with me at her own convenience.

Emily explained, "It's fun getting to type it up and send it. We can email each other and we get our own email name which is fun for people who don't have aol or msn at home so they get to use it now." Karen commented, "It's easier this year." When I asked her why she explained, "Email is easier because last year we had to print it out and put it into a book." These powerful responses display how students valued the immediacy of the communication that took place via email.

Word Processing Frustrations

Some students were not comfortable composing journal responses on the computer. This was also mentioned in the study done by Wang (1996) as one of the disadvantages of using email communication with students. When questioned about the difference between email mediated journals and paper and pencil ones, Steve explained

that although it was "neater on the computer, it was also slower to write everything you want to write." This quote demonstrates the fact that Steve was not secure with this method of communication. He was discouraged by the fact that he could not type his ideas as quickly as he could write them with pencil and paper. This information reveals how the inability to type with ease caused discomfort to some children participating in this project.

Spelling and Word Processing

Misspellings were common when students wrote journal entries in email. It seemed that on many occasions, students who would often have correct spelling in their handwritten papers, had additional mistakes when typing on the computer. Several students commented on this aspect of email. Angela acknowledged that she "probably spells more things wrong this year." Last year, when writing with paper and pencil, her teacher would correct spelling. She explained, "This was helpful." Jared agreed with this point of view. He affirmed, "Mrs. Lipton corrected spelling, punctuation, etc. in her reply. It was easier when it was checked for spelling because if you needed that word again, it was in the margin." These statements support the idea that students would have benefited from teachers correcting their spelling and grammar in pieces of writing. An online spell checker may have been valuable, too; unfortunately, the email program that we used did not have this tool.

Technical Difficulties

Occasionally during this study, we experienced technical difficulties. Sometimes HUBS Central, our email program, was not up and running. Other times the school district was working on the Internet at the time email should have been taking place.

This often resulted in frustration on both the students' and teacher's part. Sometimes students lost entire email messages because the program timed out. On one particular Thursday afternoon, the students composed their emails on HUBS Central, but when they tried to send them, the process timed out. All five students lost their email messages. These technical difficulties at times caused dissatisfaction among the participants of this study.

Convenient but time-consuming

The teacher could access email and respond to students on her own time; this was an advantage. With this method, I did not have to carry copybooks back and forth from school. I was happy to access the email from the comfort of my own home.

However, since students could also compose email from home on their own time, the teacher felt obliged to check email and respond more often. This was time consuming. This process often took about 30 minutes each evening. I usually responded to emails from home before or right after dinner. (This was about an hour after returning home from work.) Sometimes my husband would have to use the computer first, so I would have to wait until after he was done to access my email. This would delay the communication process. I tried to respond as early as I could so that I wouldn't forget. Also, I wanted students to have the opportunity to access their email before they went to bed.

In reflection, this process was advantageous to me because I did not have to labor over heavy copybooks and could access my email from any location. However, it did consume a great deal of time each evening when it was time for me to respond.

Summary

There was a myriad of findings gathered throughout this study. Despite the common directions that were given, the fifth graders who participated in this study produced emails of various lengths. In addition, students utilized this email opportunity to provide many different kinds of information about themselves and the novels they were reading. At times they used the email-meditated journals to express likes or dislikes about the literature, recommend the book to the teacher and other students, make predictions for what would happen next, reflect on a character, pose questions, respond to questions, and communicate personal messages. Students in this study were clearly motivated to participate in this activity. In fact, even as this report is being composed, students continue to be interested in using the email system. Many students felt successful with word processing. They cited that it was "easier" than writing with paper and pencil. They recognized that they had an opportunity for practicing their typing skills, and they were able to initiate conversation with this system. Conversely, some of the students felt uncomfortable with email because they were not able to type well, and misspellings in email messages were common. In addition, the technology was sometimes unreliable. Finally, the teacher noted that despite the fact that it was a benefit to access the emails from the comfort of her own home, the process also took up a great deal of time each evening.

Implications

The purpose of this study was to document what happened when students used email to submit their reader response journals. Upon analyzing the data collected, several themes emerged.

Students produced a wide variety of journal entries both in length and in content. In addition, students were very motivated to participate in this activity. In fact, after the study ended, they continued to be excited to compose and access email in school. Also, students found email to be much quicker and easier than writing with paper and pencil. Children received a great deal of typing practice, and they had opportunities to engage in dynamic conversation. In fact they were able to initiate dialogue with the teacher and were given the chance to receive personal attention in a private way. With email, students were able to receive their responses with more immediacy than with paper and pencil. This probably helped students feel as though they were engaging in authentic conversation.

Conversely, some students were frustrated by this activity because of their lack of typing skills. On occasions, the technology did not operate properly. This was discouraging to all of the participants. Misspellings were very common during the email process. Additionally, the teacher's responsibility to respond to students each evening was convenient but certainly time consuming.

This information should be useful to other teachers who are considering using email for this or a related purpose in their classrooms.

Recommendations

There were many benefits that resulted from this activity. I believe that with some minor adjustments this project could produce some additional positive outcomes.

Introducing the Project

If I were to do this project again, I would probably introduce response journals and the email program as two separate activities. I think that I might have the students

write response journals only on paper and pencil for the first four weeks. Simultaneously, I would have them practice their use of the email program during our weekly computer time. After this period of time, I would have them begin to email their responses to me. This procedure might be more effective than integrating both new ideas immediately. For some students trying to do two new activities at once was a bit overwhelming.

Additionally, I would discuss email etiquette with the students. During my research, I observed that some students sent emails to other classmates once they learned their addresses. On one occasion, a student referred a letter to me that she had received on email. It was unkind. Therefore, this lesson would concern the social aspect of the medium and would need to address the appropriate use of emails.

Email Software

Some of the difficulties with this project stemmed from the limitations that the email program had for classroom use. Although I was pleased that it was a secure site, there were still a few drawbacks.

First of all, with HUBSCentral, our email program, students could not view the original message on the same screen as the message they were composing. This was sometimes a problem when students couldn't remember comments I made or questions I asked them. Therefore, I would recommend using an email program that allows the reader to access prior messages with ease and displays the last message when students are ready to respond.

Second, misspelling seemed to be more common with word processing, and the opportunities for correcting grammar and spelling were limited with the email program we used (HUBSCentral). With this observation in mind, I would recommend finding an

email program that has an online spell checker, and then encouraging students to use it all the time.

Access to Computers and Reliability

This activity may be challenging to some teachers due to their access to computers for their students. Time was generally not an issue since I had four classroom computers and the opportunity to send other students to the library lab where there was a lab monitor. With these facilities, I was able to dedicate twenty minutes a day to having seven students email me. Obviously, the more access teachers have to computer facilities for student use, the better the situation will be.

Occasionally, the email program or the school district's Internet connections were not working. This was sometimes a frustrating problem. An Internet connection on several computers is a must, and a reliable system would make this project happen more smoothly.

Extended Time for the Teacher

Since I felt as though I could type more quickly than I wrote, I was pleased that I did not have to carry home seven copybooks each night. I could simply access the messages via email. No paperwork was necessary. It was just the computer and me. However, any educator deciding to partake in this type of activity needs to be well aware that this project was definitely time-consuming for the teacher. I spent anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour each evening Monday through Thursday checking and responding to emails. I also felt compelled to check it on weekends in case any eager students chose to write to me. In this project timeliness was a key factor since the immediacy of a response helped to perpetuate conversation, an obvious goal of the activity.

Thoughts and Reflections

I would definitely try this activity again with future classes of fifth grade students, albeit with some modifications. For example, I would certainly alter my introduction of this process to extend over a few weeks, rather than just a few days. Email etiquette would also be a priority during this time period. In addition, I would put a greater deal of emphasis on checking finished emails for both spelling and grammar before sending them to me.

This study clearly shows that, among other things, when students were engaged in email-mediated response journals they wrote extended journal entries in which they engaged in conversation about a variety of issues and participated eagerly in conversations with me about the books they were reading. This demonstrated how my students were thinking as readers. This email process kept me in touch with the literature preferences of each individual as well as each student's strengths and weaknesses. It fostered authentic communication and provided both writing composition and typing practice. Despite the time-consuming nature and some of the difficulties that arose during this study, I would say that, in my eyes, the benefits of the activity certainly outweighed the drawbacks.

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Name _____ **Date** _____

Response Journal Questionnaire

1) Have you ever done dialogue response journals before?

2) Have you ever done them on the computer before?

3) Did you do anything different when you did your response journals via email rather than with paper and pencil?

4) If you were a teacher would you have children do this? Why or why not?

5) What would be the benefit of using this with other kids?

September 12, 2002

Dear Parents,

I have great news! Our school district has been given access to a free web site called "HUBS." The acronym stands for hospitals, universities, businesses and schools. What does it mean for us? Well, I have been able to set up a mini classroom "homepage" specifically designed for what is going on in our room. You can check out pictures we have taken in school and get an update on classroom activities as well as use an online calendar for important dates. In addition, I have provided links, attachments and general information for some activities that are going on in our room. It is very user friendly and will be a great tool!

In addition, HUBS has a closed email system. Students will be using this feature in class to contact me about books that they are reading. Students will be given time in class to set up their accounts and will be able to communicate with me on a weekly basis as part of Reading Workshop. Using this feature, your child and I will have a dialogue about the literature they are reading.

I am currently a graduate student at Chestnut Hill College and working on my thesis which focuses on communication between teachers and students using email. These interactions will aid me in the completion of my study.

The page is up and running! Please check it out by following the directions below. I will update this page as the year unfolds. I hope you find this site as exciting as I have. I look forward to hearing your feedback!

Sincerely,

Colleen Kaiser

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